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# **Spies of the Balkans**

Written by Alan Furst

Published by Phoenix

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SPIES OF THE  
BALKANS

Alan Furst



PHOENIX

In autumn, the rains came to Macedonia.

The storm began in the north – on the fifth day of October in the year 1940 – where sullen cloud lay over the mountain villages on the border of Bulgaria and Greece. By midday it had drifted south, heavier now, rolling down the valley of the Vardar River until, at dusk, it reached the heights of the city of Salonika and, by the time the streetlamps came on, rain dripped from the roof tiles in the ancient alleyways of the port and dappled the surface of the flat, dark sea.

Just after six in the evening, Costa Zannis, known to the city as *a senior police official* – whatever that meant, perhaps no more than a suit instead of a uniform – left his office on the top floor of an anonymous building on the Via Egnatia, walked down five flights of creaky wooden stairs, stepped out into the street and snapped his umbrella aloft. Earlier that day he'd had a telephone call from the port captain, something to do with the arrival of the Turkish tramp freighter *Bakir* – 'an irregularity' was the phrase the captain used, adding that he preferred to pursue the matter in person. 'You understand me, Costa,' he'd said. Oh yes, Zannis understood all too well. At that moment, Greece had been ruled by the Metaxas dictatorship since 1936 – the length of women's skirts was regulated; it was forbidden to read aloud the funeral oration of Pericles – and people were cautious about what they said on the telephone. And, with much of Europe occupied by Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's armies in Albania, on the Greek frontier, one

wasn't sure what came next. So, *don't trust the telephone*. Or the newspapers. Or the radio. Or tomorrow.

Entering the vast street market on Aristotle Square, Zannis furled his umbrella and worked his way through the narrow aisles. Rain pattered on the tin roofing above the stalls, fish-mongers shouted to the crowd, and, as Zannis passed by, the merchants smiled or nodded or avoided his eyes, depending on where they thought they stood with the Salonika police that evening. A skeletal old woman from the countryside, black dress, black head scarf, offered him a dried fig. He smiled politely and declined, but she thrust it towards him, the mock ferocity of her expression meaning that he had no choice. He tore the stem off, flicked it into the gutter, then ate the fig, which was fat and sweet, raised his eyebrows in appreciation, said, 'It's very good, thank you,' and went on his way. At the far end of the market, a sponge peddler, a huge sack slung over his shoulder, peered anxiously out at the rain. Marooned, he could only wait, for if his sponges got wet he'd have to carry the weight for the rest of the night.

The customs house stood at the centre of the city's two main piers, its function stated on a broad sign above the main entry, first in Greek, then with the word *Douane*. On the upper floor, the port captain occupied a corner office, the sort of office that had over the years become a home; warm in the chilly weather, the still air scented with wood smoke and cigarettes, one of the port cats asleep by the wood-stove. On the wall behind the desk hung a brightly coloured oleograph of Archbishop Alexandros, in long black beard and hair flowing to his shoulders, hands clasped piously across his ample stomach. By his side, formal photographs of a stern General Metaxas and a succession of port officials of the past, two of them, in fading sepia prints, wearing the Turkish fez. On the adjoining wall, handsomely framed, were the wife and children of the present occupant, well fed, dressed to the hilt and looking very dignified.

The present occupant was in no hurry; a brief call on the telephone produced, in a few minutes, a waiter from a nearby *kafeneion* – coffee house – with two tiny cups of Turkish coffee on a brass tray. After a sip, the captain lit a cigarette and said, ‘I hope I didn’t get you down here for nothing, Costa. In such miserable fucking weather.’

Zannis didn’t mind. ‘It’s always good to see you,’ he said. ‘The *Bakir*, I think you said. Where’s she berthed?’

‘Number eight, on the left-hand side. Just behind a Dutch grain freighter – a German grain freighter now, I guess.’

‘For the time being,’ Zannis said.

They paused briefly to savour the good things the future might hold, then the captain said, ‘*Bakir* docked this morning. I waited an hour, the captain never showed up, so I went to find him. Nothing unusual, gangplank down, nobody about, so I went on board and headed for the captain’s office, which is pretty much always in the same place, just by the bridge. A few sailors at work, but it was quiet on board, and going down the passageway towards the bridge I passed the wardroom. Two officers, gossiping in Turkish and drinking coffee, and a little man in a suit, with shiny shoes, reading a newspaper. German newspaper. Oh, I thought, a passenger.’

‘See his face?’

‘Actually I didn’t. He was behind his newspaper – *Völkischer Beobachter*? I believe it was. Anyway, I didn’t think much about it. People get around these days any way they can, and they don’t go anywhere at all unless they have to.’

‘Submarines.’

The captain nodded. ‘You may just have to swim. Eventually I found the captain up on the bridge – a man I’ve known for years, by the way – and we went back to his office so I could have a look at the manifest. But – no passenger. So, I asked. “Who’s the gent in the wardroom?” The captain just looked at me. What a look!’

‘Meaning . . .?’

‘Meaning *Don’t ask me that*. Life’s hard enough these days without this sort of nonsense.’

Zannis’s smile was ironic. ‘Oh dear,’ he said.

The captain laughed, relieved. ‘Don’t be concerned, you mean.’

From Zannis, a small sigh. ‘No, but it’s me who has to be concerned. On the other hand, as long as he stays where he is . . . What’s she carrying?’

‘In ballast. She’s here to load baled tobacco, then heading up to Hamburg.’

‘You didn’t happen to see the passenger come this way, did you?’

‘No, he hasn’t left the ship.’

Zannis raised an eyebrow ‘You’re sure?’

‘I’ve had a taxi waiting out there all afternoon. If he tries to enter the city, two beeps on the horn.’

This time the sigh was deeper, because Zannis’s plans for the evening had vanished into the night. ‘I’ll use your telephone,’ he said. ‘And then I’ll take a little walk.’

Zannis walked past the taxi on the pier – the driver awake, to his surprise – then continued until he could see the *Bakir*. Nothing unusual; a rust-streaked grey hull, a cook tossing a pail of kitchen waste into the bay. He’d thought about ordering up a pair of detectives, then decided not to get them out in the rain. But now the rain had stopped, leaving in its place a heavy mist that made halos around the streetlamps. Zannis stood there, the city behind him quiet, a foghorn moaning somewhere out in the darkness.

He’d turned forty that summer, not a welcome event but what could you do. He was of average height, with a thick muscular body and only an inch of belly above his belt. Skin a pale olive colour, not bad-looking at all though more boxer than movie star, a tough guy, in the way he moved, in the way he held himself. Until you looked at his face, which suggested quite

a different sort of person. Wide generous mouth and, behind steel-framed spectacles, very blue eyes: lively eyes. He had dry black hair which, despite being combed with water in the morning, was tousled by the time he reached the office and fell down on his forehead and made him look younger, and softer, than he was. All in all, an expressive face, rarely still – when you spoke to him you could always see what he thought about whatever you said, amusement or sympathy or curiosity, but always something. So, maybe a tough guy, but your friend the tough guy. The policeman. And, in his black suit and soft grey shirt, tie knot always pulled down and the collar button of the shirt open, a rather gentle version of the breed. On purpose, of course.

He'd certainly never meant to be a cop. And – once he fell into being a cop – never a detective, and – once promoted to that position – never what he was now. He'd never even known such a job existed. Neither of his parents had been educated beyond the first six years; his grandmother could neither read nor write, his mother doing so only with difficulty. His father had worked his way into half-ownership of a florist shop in the good part of Salonika, so the family was never poor; they managed, pretty much like everyone else he knew. Zannis wasn't much of a student, which didn't matter because in time he'd work in the shop. And, until 1912, Salonika had remained a part of the Ottoman Empire – Athens and the western part of the nation having fought free of the Turks in 1832 – so to be Greek was to know your place and the sort of ambition that drew attention wasn't such a good idea.

By the age of twelve, as the Greek army marched in to end the Second Balkan War, Zannis's private dreams had mostly involved escape; foreign places called to him, so maybe work on a ship or a train. Not unusual. His mother's brother had emigrated to America, to a mysterious place called Altoona, in the state of Pennsylvania, from whence postal cards arrived showing the main street or the railway station. Until 1912, at times when

the money ran out, the Zannis family considered joining him, working in his diner, a silvery building with rounded corners. Yes, maybe they should go there; they'd have to talk about it. Soon.

And, six years later, they did leave, but they didn't go to Altoona. In 1917, as Anglo-French and Greek forces fought the Bulgarians in Macedonia, a sideshow to the war in France, Salonika burned, in what came to be known as the Great Fire. The Zannis house, up in the heights by the ancient battlements, survived, but the florist shop did not, and there was no money to rebuild. Now what?

It was his father's brother who saved the day. He had, as a young man, involved himself in fighting the Turks, with a pistol, and the day came when, threatened with life in a Turkish prison, he had to run away. He ran to Paris, mostly walking or riding trains without a ticket until they threw him off, but in time he got there.

And, with luck and determination, with playing cards for money, and with the advent of a jolly French widow of a certain age, he had managed to buy a stall in the flea market in Clignancourt, in the well-visited section known as Serpette. 'Forget Altoona,' he wrote in a letter to his brother. 'I need you here.' A little money was sent and the Zannis family, parents and grandmother, Costa and his younger brother – an older sister had earlier married an electrician and emigrated to Argentina – got on a fruit ship and worked their way to Le Havre. And there, waving up at them from the wharf, was the benevolent uncle and his jolly wife. On the train, Zannis's heart rose with every beat of the rails.

Two hours later, he'd found his destiny: Paris. The girls adored him – soon enough he fell in love – and he had a lot of money for a seventeen-year-old boy from Greece. He worked for his uncle as an *antiquaire*, an antiques dealer, selling massive armoires and all sorts of junk to tourists and the very occasional Parisian. They had a magnificent old rogue with a great white beard who

turned out Monets and Rubenses by the yard. ‘Well, I can’t say, because it isn’t signed, maybe you should have somebody look at it, but if the nice lady comes back in twenty minutes, as she swore she would, we’ll have to sell it, so if I were you . . .’

The happiest time of his life, those twelve years.

At least, he thought later, it lasted that long. In 1929, as the markets crashed, Zannis’s father went to bed with what seemed like a bad cold then died a day later of influenza, while they were still waiting for the doctor. Bravely, Zannis’s mother insisted they stay where they were – Costa was doing so well. By then he spoke good French – the lingua franca of Salonika – and he’d taken courses in German and learned to speak it well: some day the stall would be his, he’d met a woman, Laurette, a few years older than he and raising two children, and he was enchanted with her. A year earlier they’d started living together in Saint-Ouen, home to the Clignancourt market. But, as winter turned to spring, his mother’s grief did not subside and she wanted to go home. Back to where she could see her family and gossip with friends.

She never said it aloud but Zannis, now head of the household, knew what she felt and so they went home. Laurette could not, or would not, leave with him, would not take her children to a foreign place, so her heart was broken. As was his. But family was family.

Back in Salonika, and urgently needing to make a living, he took a job as a policeman. He didn’t much care for it, but he worked hard and did well. In a city where the quarter known as the Bara held the largest red-light district in eastern Europe, in a city of waterfront dives and sailors of every nation, there was always plenty of work for a policeman. Especially the tolerant sort of policeman who settled matters before they got out of hand and never took money.

By 1934 he was promoted to detective and, three years later, to, technically, the rank of sub-commander, though nobody ever used that title. This advancement did not just happen by itself.

An old and honoured expression, from the time of the Turkish occupation, said that it was most fortunate to have a *barba sto palati*, an uncle in the palace, and it turned out, to Zannis's surprise, that he had that very thing. His particular talent, a kind of rough diplomacy, getting people to do what he wanted without hitting them, had been observed from on high by the head of the Salonika police, a near mystic presence in the city. Vangelis was at least eighty years old, some said older, with the smile of a saint – thus St Vangelis, at least to those who could appreciate irony and veneration in the same phrase. For fifty years, nothing had gone on in Salonika that the old man didn't know about, and he'd watched Zannis's career with interest. So in 1937, when Zannis decided to resign his position, Vangelis offered him a new one. His own office, a detective, a clerk and a greatly improved salary. 'I need someone to handle these matters,' Vangelis told him, and went on to describe what he needed. Zannis understood right away and in time became known to the world at large as *a senior police official*, but to those with knowledge of the subterranean intricacies of the city's life, and soon enough to the Salonika street, he was simply 'Zannis'.

Was the Belgian consul being blackmailed by a prostitute?  
Call Zannis.

Had the son of an Athenian politician taken a diamond ring from a jeweller and refused to pay for it? Call Zannis.

Did a German civilian arrive 'unofficially' in Salonika on the freighter of a neutral nation?

When Zannis walked back to the foot of the pier he found his assistant, Gabriel – Gabi – Saltiel, waiting for him, smoking a cigarette, leaning back in the driver's seat. Saltiel loved his car, a hard-sprung black Skoda 420, built by the Czechs for Balkan roads. 'Pull over behind the wall, Gabi,' Zannis said. 'Out of sight, where we can just see the pier.'

Saltiel pushed the ignition button, the engine rumbled to life

and he swung the car around and headed for the customs house. A grey fifty-five, Saltiel, tall and shambling, slump-shouldered and myopic, who viewed the world, with a mixture of patience and cynicism, through thick-framed glasses. A Sephardic Jew, from the large community in Salonika, he'd somehow become a policeman and prospered at the job because he was intelligent, sharp, very smart about people – who they really were. And persistent – a courteous, diffident bulldog. On the day that Vangelis offered Zannis the new job, saying, 'And find somebody you can work with,' he had telephoned Gabi Saltiel, explained what he'd be doing and asked Saltiel to join him. 'What's it called, this department?' Saltiel said. 'It doesn't need a name,' Zannis answered. Ten seconds passed, a long time on the telephone. Finally, Saltiel said, 'When do I start?'

Now Zannis headed for the taxi, gave the driver some money, thanked him and sent him home. When Zannis slid into the passenger seat of the Skoda, Saltiel said, 'So, what's going on?'

Zannis repeated the port captain's story, then said, 'As long as he doesn't enter the city, we leave him alone. We'll give him a few hours to do something, then, if he's still holed up in the ship, I'll get some detectives to replace us.'

'What if he waits until morning, strolls down here and shows a passport to the control officer?'

'Follow him,' Zannis said. 'I don't want him running loose in the city.'

'German, you said.'

'Reads a German newspaper, who knows what he is.'

'A spy, you think?'

'Could be. The Turkish captain more or less said he was. With a look.'

Saltiel laughed. 'The Levant,' he said. 'A look indeed – I wouldn't live anywhere else.' After a moment he added, 'What's a spy after in Salonika? Any idea?'

'Who knows. Maybe just the war, coming south.'

‘Don’t say such things, Costa. Down here, at the arse-end of the Balkans, who cares?’

‘Not Hitler. Not according to the newspapers. And he has to know what goes on here, up in the mountains, when we’re occupied.’

Saltiel looked thoughtful. ‘Still,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Well, I have a nephew who teaches at the technical school. Geography, among other things. A smart boy, Manni, he says that as long as Hitler stays allied with the Russians, we’re safe. But, if he attacks them, we could be in for it. On the map of Europe we’re the right flank – if somebody’s heading east, the right flank that goes to the Caucasus, for the oil. Anyhow, that’s Manni’s theory.’

‘Believe it?’

Saltiel shrugged. ‘Hitler’s cunning, I wouldn’t say intelligent, but cunning. Jews he attacks, Russians he leaves alone.’

Zannis nodded, it sounded reasonable. ‘Before I forget,’ he said, ‘did you bring what I asked for?’

‘In the glovebox.’

Zannis opened the glovebox and took out a Walther PPK automatic, the German weapon preferred by Balkan detectives. There were bright metal scratches on the base of the grip. ‘What have you been doing with this?’

‘Hanging pictures,’ Saltiel said. ‘The last time I saw my hammer, one of the grandkids was playing with it.’

‘Kids,’ Zannis said, with a smile.

‘I’m blessed,’ Saltiel said. ‘You ought to get busy, Costa, you’re not getting any younger.’

Zannis’s smile widened. ‘With Roxanne?’ he said, naming his English girlfriend.

‘Well . . .’ Saltiel said. ‘I guess not.’

8.20 p.m. It had started to rain again, a few lightning flashes out in the Aegean. ‘You awake?’ Zannis said.

‘Just barely.’

‘You want a nap, go ahead.’

‘No thanks. Maybe later.’

10.30 p.m. ‘By the way,’ Zannis said, ‘did you telephone Madam Pappas?’

‘This morning, about eleven.’

‘And she said?’

‘That she hated her husband and she’s glad he’s dead.’

‘That’s honest.’

‘I thought so.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No, she was getting ready to scream at me, so I got off the phone – you said to go easy.’

Zannis nodded. ‘Let the detectives deal with her.’

‘She kill him?’

‘She did.’

‘Naughty girl.’

1.15 a.m. Quiet, in the city behind them. Only faint music from the tavernas on the seafront corniche and the creaking of the pier as the tide worked at the pilings. The sound was hypnotic and Zannis fought to stay awake. He took a cigarette from the flat box in his pocket – a Papastratos No. 1, top of the line in Greece – and struck a wooden match alight with his thumbnail. Expensive, these things, so a luxury for him. He made good money now, Vangelis had seen to that, but good money for a cop, which wasn’t very much, not with four people to feed. His younger brother Ari, for Aristotle, sometimes made a few drachmas by carrying messages in the city. Poor soul, he did the best he could but he wasn’t quite right, had always been ‘different’, and the family had long ago accepted him for who he was.

It was getting smoky in the car and Saltiel rolled down the window. ‘Do you think there are men on the moon?’ he said.

‘I don’t know. I suppose anything’s possible.’

‘They were arguing about it, yesterday, in the barbershop.’

‘Little green men? With one eye? Like in Buck Rogers?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Somebody in your barbershop thinks those movies are true?’

‘That’s what it sounded like.’

‘I’d change barbers, if I were you.’

3.30 a.m. ‘Wake up, Gabi.’

‘I wasn’t sleeping. Not really.’

‘Here he comes.’

Of medium height, the man wore a raincoat and carried a briefcase. He had a hard, bony, chinless face beneath a hat with the brim tilted over his eyes. As he neared the end of the pier, Zannis and Saltiel ducked down below the windscreen. By now they could hear footsteps, determined and in a hurry, that approached, then faded away from them, heading around the east side of the customs house, towards the city – to the west lay the warehouse district and the railway station. Zannis made sure of the Walther in the pocket of his jacket, slid out of the passenger seat and was careful not to slam the door, leaving it ajar. ‘Give me thirty seconds, Gabi,’ he said. ‘Then follow along, nice and slow, headlights off, and keep your distance.’

Zannis walked quickly to the east side of the customs house, paused at the corner and had a quick look around it. Nobody. Where the hell had he gone? There was only one street he could have taken, which served the warehouses. Zannis, moving at a fast trot, reached the street, turned the corner and there he was – there somebody was – about two blocks away. Now Zannis realized he was getting wet, put up his umbrella and moved into the shelter of the high brick wall of the first warehouse. Up ahead the German sped on, with long strides, as though, Zannis thought, he was taking his evening constitutional on a path in some Deutschland forest. A few seconds later the Skoda turned the corner behind him and Zannis signalled, waving his hand backwards, for Saltiel to stay where he was. Zannis could hear

the engine idling as the Skoda rolled to a stop. Could the German hear it? Doubtful, especially in the rain, but Zannis couldn't be sure – the street was dead silent.

Then the German glanced over his shoulder and turned right, down a narrow alley. He'd likely seen Zannis, but so what? Just a man with an umbrella, trudging along, shoulders hunched, on a miserable night. Zannis walked past the alley, ignoring it, eyes on the ground ahead of him, until he passed the far corner and moved out of sight. He didn't stop there but went farther down the street – if he could hear the German, the German could hear him – then looked for a place to hide. He saw a loading dock across from him and moved quickly, soaking one foot in a puddle between broken cobblestones, hurried up the steps and stood in the angle of the shuttered entryway and the wall, which was blind from the street – as far as the alley, anyhow. The German wasn't going anywhere, Zannis realized, not from this alley, where, a few years earlier, a porter had stabbed Hamid the moneylender in an argument over a few lepta – not even a drachma – and it was blocked by a high stone wall covered with a wisteria vine. Hamid had staggered as far as the wall and pulled at the wisteria, thinking to climb over, but the vine came away from the crumbling stone and he died right there. The porter covered him up with the vine but in a few hours – it was summertime – Hamid had made his presence well-known and the crime was discovered. A sad business, Zannis thought, the moneylenders preyed on the waterfront labourers like hawks on pigeons. Was this a law of nature? Perhaps it was. A real hawk had once tried to get at one of his little brother's canaries, in a cage on the windowsill, and bent the hell out of the wire frame.

Zannis looked at his watch, 3.39, and settled down to wait. This was a meeting, of course, and somebody was going to show up, sooner or later. If he was dumb enough to walk past the idling Skoda, they'd get both of them. If not, just the German, though Saltiel would probably take off after the second man. Woman? Maybe, anything was possible.

★

3.48 a.m. *Hurry up, you bastards, have your fucking meeting and let me go home to bed.* After arrest, and a trip to the police station, where they'd get what they could, then run him back to the ship. After all, he hadn't done much – entered Salonika without having his passport stamped. No point in keeping him. The German consul would squawk, Vangelis would be irritated, the hell with it.

4.00 a.m. What was the German doing down there? Was there a way through to another street that Zannis didn't know about? Oh, a fine thing that would be! *I stood there in the rain until dawn but I never saw him again.* Zannis sighed, shifted from his wet foot to his dry one and thought about Roxanne, about making love, which was what they did. Sure, a restaurant now and . . . Suddenly, his mind snapped back to full attention.

From the other end of the street, at the corner of a distant alley, headlights – no car yet, just beams probing the mist. What? Could you get through down there? Zannis didn't know, but obviously somebody did because the lights swung left into the street and now pointed directly at him. He scurried along the iron shutter to the opposite corner and wound up facing the Skoda. What would Saltiel do? Nothing. The lights stayed off. *Good, Gabi, that's the way.*

*And next,* he thought, addressing the unseen driver of the car, *you'll turn into the alley.* It was a Renault sedan that muttered past him, going very slowly, but his prediction was off. The Renault paused at the alley, moved forward a few feet and backed in. *Clever,* Zannis thought, ready for a fast getaway. What was this? Another murder in the alley? Was it cursed? Was this long, boring, stupid night going to end in melodrama?

Whatever happened down there didn't take long. It happened in the alley and it happened quickly and it happened where Zannis couldn't see it. A car door slammed, an engine roared and the Renault reappeared, taking a fast left turn into the street

and speeding off. Zannis squinted into the rain, trying to see through the cloudy rear window – someone in the passenger seat? No, he didn't think so. As he hurried down the steps from the loading dock, he watched the Renault as it flew past the Skoda. *Count: one, two, three, four*; then the Skoda's lights came on and Saltiel made a nice easy turn and followed the Renault, which had turned east up the deserted corniche.

As Zannis approached the alley, the German came out. They stopped dead, facing each other, maybe thirty feet apart, then the German, like Hamid the moneylender, went scuttling back down the alley. Heading for the wisteria vine? No, he had a better idea, because by the time Zannis entered the alley, he'd disappeared. The magic German. Where? Zannis trotted along the sheer wall, very tense about some sort of unseen cover at his back, very certain that he was about to be shot. But then, just at the foot of the alley, a door. A door that, he guessed, would lead into the office of the warehouse. Had he forgotten it? Had it even been there, back then?

Walther. Yes, the time had come, work the slide, arm it, assume Gabi kept it loaded, assume he'd put the bullets back in the clip when he'd finished hanging up his picture. For he'd surely *unloaded* it, knowing full well that banging loaded weapons on hard surfaces wasn't such a good idea – the very least you could hope for was embarrassment and it got quickly worse from there. Grandpa! The cat! No, Gabi had done the right thing because Gabi always did the right thing. No?

Zannis closed the umbrella and set it by the wall, freed the Walther's clip, found it fully loaded and locked it back in place. Then he stood to one side of the door and, making sure of his balance, raised his foot and kicked at the knob, intending to make it rattle on the other side. No bullets from inside, so he reached over, turned the knob and opened the door. Unlocked. Always unlocked? Unlocked at the moment. Keeping to the cover of the wall as much as he could, he swung the door wide, waited a beat, then rushed in low, Walther pointed ahead of him.